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THE ARTS

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Masterful choreography earns Natyakalalayam Dance Company entry to top-level productions

My job is to inspire bhakti within them," Hema Rajagopalan explained, "Their job onstage is to transport the audience to a higher level." Hema is the 48-year-old founder and artistic director of the Natyakalalayam Dance Company in Chicago, Illinois. Every major city in America now has one bharata natyam dance school, if not dozens. But Natyakalalayam is different, and not just in Hema's insistence on religious devotion in her dancers. "Dance is the best media for me, I found that through teaching dance I could teach Hindu ethics, culture and background."

The school trains 200 students (all girls except three boys) ranging in age from 5 to 67, taught each week by Hema and her daughter, Krithika. Students are mostly Indian Americans. Fifteen are of European descent. One came from Poland just to study. While the group is mostly Hindu, it also includes Jains, Christians and Muslims.

It's touring company, comprised of eighteen advanced students, performing Hema's original choreography, that really

attracts the praise. They've danced at Carnegie Hall, The Smithsonian, Lincoln Center, the World Music Institute of New York, the Avignon Festival in France, as well as in Berlin and Geneva, Switzerland. Hema told Hinduism Today, "When I choreograph, it is just meant to be. It just comes. I can't explain it. I think it comes with the blessings of Goddess Saraswati." Hema creates more of a stage show than most companies, with complex interactions of the dancers rather than the more traditional solo dances.

Chicago boasts some of the world's best ethnic companies, and here Hema pioneers new territory with cross-cultural dancing. Her group has performed with the Sundance African Dance company, ALYO Children's Dance Theater and Trinity Irish Dancers. She shared an Emmy--television's Oscar--for choreography in the PBS multi-ethnic production "World Stage Chicago."

Her fifty or so original pieces include several drawn from the stories of the 63 Saivite Nayanar saints, and others from the classic Panchatantra and Jataka tales. In one, she even choreographed Lord Siva's meeting Parvati in a Chicago setting! Hema is currently working on two new performances: the "Goddess of Liberation" and "Amma," or mother. The "Goddess of Liberation" glorifies the feminine qualities of human beings, such as love, gentleness, protection and compassion. "Amma" is a dance animating stories gathered from first-generation immigrant mothers of many cultures, depicting how they have coped with the problem of children losing their ancestral cultures and becoming Westernized.

NATYAKALALAYAM, 2936 N. SOUTHPORT, SUITE 210, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS,
60657, USA. EMAIL: NATYADC@AOL.COM